

State justices open process to the public

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It's easy to perceive the state's judicial system as an impenetrable monolith — as cold and hard as the marble and concrete that enclose the Temple of Justice, the state Supreme Court's home in Olympia. At the beginning of this week, the court's nine justices literally and figuratively opened up the system to the people of the Yakima Valley.

This occurred very much by design. Several times a year, the justices hold hearings at venues scattered throughout the state; last month, they met at Seattle University. This week, it was Heritage University's turn; at its campus outside Toppenish, all nine justices convened to hear oral arguments on three cases. The justices have met before in the Yakima Valley, most recently in 2004 at Yakima Valley Community College. Before that, the court convened in 1985 at Davis High School, which in its incarnation of Yakima High School was the alma mater of U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas.

During the day Monday, the court mingled with Heritage students, faculty, staff, administrators, members of the legal community and observers from the community at large. Four of the justices went into the classes themselves, while five others fielded questions that evoked very human and personal responses to at-times unconventional queries. On Monday night, much of the Valley's legal community greeted the justices during an event put on by Heritage and the Yakima Bar Association at the Yakima Valley Museum.

Then on Tuesday, the justices donned their judicial robes and heard arguments in three cases: one concerning the refusal of a DUI suspect to take a field-sobriety test; another on jury instructions regarding the ages of the victim and defendant in a child rape case. The third case, a Skagit County case involving paying piece-rate workers for rest breaks, could have a tremendous impact on Central Washington agriculture and garnered the most local interest.

In each of the hearings, the court heard 20 minutes of reasoning from attorneys representing each side; no witnesses were called to the stand, and no new evidence was submitted. The court will issue its rulings on Tuesday's cases at a later date.

Efforts like this are far from the only outreach that the court conducts. Justices have been involved in the Washington State Minority & Justice Commission, which continually seeks ways to make the justice system fair to all state residents, regardless of ethnicity or economic standing. The court regularly sponsors conferences that seek to educate the public about the judicial system.

In traveling to Toppenish, the nine justices perform a visible and valuable service in educating the public and breaking down the intimidating wall that citizens may see as blocking access to elected officials. We issue our congratulations to Heritage University and its president, John Bassett, in serving as host for two days, and our thanks to the court for bringing its proceedings to the Yakima Valley for the public to see.

- Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Sharon J. Prill, Bob Crider, Frank Purdy and Karen Troianello.